

Remembering beyond what we see

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written:

*“He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever”.*

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (2 Corinthians 9:6-15)

It is quite a display we have before us here. The harvest of both produce from the earth and manufactured goods testify to variety, imagination, generosity, lavishness – every item on the display is a new taste sensation. The harvest is indeed bountiful. Are we lucky? No. The term seems trite in the face of such diversity – this isn’t manna – same ol’ same ol’ for all of our lives – but riches from the earth – to eat or to use. In our rush, people might ignore the truth behind it but when stopping and looking, when seeing and reflecting, we cannot but realise that everything on display is a *gift*. And the question then comes: From whom?

Paul reminded the Corinthians that they should thank and praise God for his indescribable gift. This gift is God’s grace and that focuses us on Jesus Christ and what he has done for us on the cross. Yet apart from the 12 apostles, Paul on the Damascus Road, and the 500 witnesses who saw the risen Jesus it requires a leap of faith to say that God’s grace is *seen* in Jesus Christ. I suspect that most of the Corinthians reading Paul’s letter would have been like us – we thank and praise God for Jesus even though we don’t see him personally but instead trust that his words makes water and bread and wine means of grace for us. We don’t see Jesus and yet we thank and praise God for his indescribable gift of his Son and because of that when we look at the world – what we do see – we can also thank God.

So it is not unusual to look at this harvest display and see it as part of God’s ongoing gift to us. God created us, God saved us, and now God continues to give us what we need – gifts – so that we can live with him and with each other. This is what Paul was seeking to remind the Corinthians – nothing really is ours in terms of ownership. Everything is God’s and we have loan of it; we are stewards of these gifts; and one sign that we do thank God for his grace in Jesus (whom we don’t see) is how we use what we do see – the stuff of everyday life – the harvest, the produce, the manufacture.

Paul was encouraging the Corinthians to give generously to the appeal he was organising for the church in Jerusalem. They had promised to do so and Paul had told other churches of their promise and those churches had been encouraged and had given and now Paul was sending messengers so that the Corinthians would be ready when he arrived. He uses harvest imagery liberally – the sowing of the seed and reaping – sow little seed, get little crop; sow lots, reap lots – and he encourages generosity as God is generous to us. His goal is not philanthropy – nice as that might be – his goal is that all people – the Corinthians, himself, and the church in Jerusalem will give thanks to God; praise God.

What Paul does here challenges the prosperity preachers of today who say that Christians will have many blessings of affluence. What Paul does here undercuts the default human view that if I worked for it, it's mine. What Paul does here is to give a gospel perspective on how we live – with the nitty gritty, the harvest, the possessions, the stuff of our world.

God provides more than enough for everyone to have food to eat and drink and material for shelter. He doesn't drop it as a packed lunch onto a kitchen table each morning but works through seed time and harvest and the sweat of our brows to provide all that is needed for everyone on this planet. Scarcity through famine or flood or natural disaster does not – and never has – meant that people must starve. Joseph in Egypt could feed the nations, not just Egypt when the famine came; and similarly when the church – the Christians in Jerusalem – were struggling and Paul was making his appeal, there were enough supplies to go around if people shared. The United Nations today still says that the world produces enough food to feed everyone and the principle cause of hunger is poverty not scarcity. The message is clear that whether we work for our food and things of life or for a time we receive them as gifts from others, the things of this world are always gifts from God.

Pastor Daniel praises God for us because we helped him with his education. He has nothing or very little and we have helped him with what, in his eyes, is much and so he praises God. We, who work or have much, can be blinded by our effort and sweat and desire to make our own way and often not thank God for our wages or for what we have bought but bemoan our loans and what we have to do to repay them – we just don't thank God in the same way as Pastor Daniel ... until maybe a harvest table is put in front of us and we pause or we go through a time in life when we do have nothing or little and we are helped.

Christians are called to work and not be idle – not to get what we need as such although that is a consequence we should not ignore (!) – but we work so that we can serve others with the harvest or manufacture so that everyone can thank and praise God. What we don't hear in the English in this text that is evident in the Greek are the echoes of worship in the words that apply to our Monday to Saturday work days – our work is *ministry* – our work is *service, liturgy*, a public service which leads to thanksgiving (*eucharist*) and χάρις which has the double meaning for grace and thanks.

Whatever it took to set up this harvest table – whatever the human input – God is behind it all. Christians in Christ can know this and understand that God serves them in worship with grace and liturgy and the means of grace and his Son so his followers can view their living in the world as using what God provides – the soil, the tool, the desk, the mind, the microscope to do stuff and that is a public service which will hopefully lead people to praise God and draw them closer to him in Christ.